DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE VIA TELECONFERENCE WITH REAR ADMIRAL ARTHUR E. BROOKS, COMMANDER, U.S. COAST GUARD 17TH DISTRICT SUBJECT: COAST GUARD ARCTIC OPERATIONS TIME: 2:02 P.M. EDT DATE: THURSDAY, AUGUST 21, 2008

(Note: Please refer to www.dod.mil for more information.)

LIEUTENANT JENNIFER CRAGG (Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Okay, sir. I know your time is valuable, so we're going to go ahead and get started. And if the other bloggers join us, then we'll just introduce them as we go along.

ADM. BROOKS: Very well.

LT. CRAGG: With that, I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of Defense's Bloggers Roundtable for Thursday, August 21st, 2008. My name is Lieutenant Jennifer Cragg, and I'm with the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, and I'll be moderating the call today.

A note to the bloggers on line: Please state your name and the blog, organization that you're with. And with that, today our guest is Rear Admiral Arthur Brooks. He's the commander of U.S. Coast Guard 17th District, Joint Forces Maritime Component commander, Alaska. And he has a variety of topics to discuss.

And with that, I'm going turn it over to you, sir, if you want to open with an opening statement, and then I'll turn it over to the bloggers for questions.

ADM. BROOKS: Well, good morning or good afternoon, based on where you are. I'm Admiral Arthur Brooks, but I go by the name Gene. The middle name is Eugene.

The first correction I need to make is that while my bio does include me as the Joint Forces Maritime Component for Alaska, that's not exactly true. That concept has been proposed by the Northern Command and has not been adopted by the U.S. Navy or others. So our current military status in Alaska is that we have a homeland security detachment from the Pacific Fleet with us here in Juneau that coordinates naval visits and naval activities here in Alaska. But I'm not actually a JFMCC for Alaska.

Turning to the topic I think you're most interested in, being the Arctic, it became obvious to me 18 months to two years ago that with the retreat of the multi-year polar sea ice, the Coast Guard was going to have to do more than it had in the past to provide maritime safety and security to northern and western Alaska, the Arctic Ocean and the Beaufort Sea.

And so we started doing initial planning as much as a year ago, and this summer -- through the spring and summer we've been conducting a testbed for moving various Coast Guard units into the Arctic environment and determining their suitability for service in northern Alaska, conducting all missions.

And those operations are ongoing.

We just completed tests in Barrow, Alaska for a forward operating location with two small boats and two H-65 helicopters, land-based. And we've also completed -- attempted a security exercise in Prudhoe Bay at the petroleum facilities there. And we are currently considering a deployment of the Hamilton, a 378 (foot) high-endurance cutter, to the North Slope to see what other lessons we could learn.

What questions do you have for me? Over.

LT. CRAGG: Let me go ahead and -- sir, thank you for that opening statement. I'm going to turn it over to Peter first. Peter, go ahead.

Q Okay. Admiral Brooks, Peter Stinson, with An Unofficial Coast Guard Blog. Good to speak with you again, sir.

ADM. BROOKS: Thank you.

Q My first question is what insights and observations have your personnel made this summer with regard to the maritime environment in the Arctic?

ADM. BROOKS: Peter, the initial lessons learned are just being developed. We've done first impressions. Some first impressions we learned is that it snows heavily in August in Barrow. We had a summer storm that brought temperatures down to 30 degrees and a lot of snow. A wind shift brought the polar sea ice back to Barrow. For much of the week, we could not launch boats on the beach because of sea ice. Even though the ice was light, it still was ice, and our boats aren't rated for ice operations.

We learned that the distances are so great that it's difficult for H-65s to reach the places we need to go to cover search and rescue or other missions in the Arctic. We also found that we didn't have a configuration that would allow us to launch boats in Prudhoe Bay and that the facilities there, you know, were not built for or designed for our use. And we're going to have to look harder at how to launch boats in Prudhoe Bay.

Those are just the first indications.

Q Great. Thank you, sir. LT. CRAGG: And Peter, we'll go back and forth between you, Peter, and David. David, next.

Q Sure, great. Hi, this is David Axe with Wired, the DANGER ROOM blog. Nice to speak to you.

ADM. BROOKS: Nice to speak to you, David.

Q So looking at the big picture, do you think the relatively small force of icebreakers that the Coast Guard has are going to suffice for, you know, emerging Arctic missions?

ADM. BROOKS: David, it's my opinion that the American icebreaker fleet is inadequate and perhaps woefully inadequate for the building missions in the Arctic.

In order to project a surface presence in that part of the world for any extended period of time, you very quickly realize that because of the weather conditions -- meaning that even though it's more ice- free than ever, there's still ice much of the year -- and the distances involved -- these places are very far away -- it requires polar icebreakers.

And that means that the United States is going to have to increase its capability for sovereignty, homeland security or, in fact, multi- mission capability in the Arctic. And by that, I include the science mission, because we still need to do science as much as ever to determine what's happening in that part of the world.

Q Great. Thanks.

LT. CRAGG: You there?

Q Yes, ma'am. Admiral, recently Vice Admiral Papp mentioned that he thought the Coast Guard needed at least another 10,000 people to do the work of our legislated mission areas that needs to be done. How many Coasties do you have in Alaska now, and how many more do you think you might need? And what sorts of things do you think they'll be doing, say, five or 10 years from now that they're not doing now?

ADM. BROOKS: Peter, I'll have to get back to you with the specific numbers, because it keeps changing depending on how you count. But we'll get it back to you today with specific numbers of Coasties in Alaska.

The reality is that we currently operate almost exclusively in southeastern, south central and southwestern Alaska. We do conduct search and rescue cases and science missions in northern and western Alaska, but I'd like to say that the Coast Guard presence historically has been episodic and superficial.

We've had some great cases in the Arctic over the years, but they're few and far between. If the mission expands -- and that's a national decision, not a 17th District or even a Coast Guard decision -- if the mission expands to include northern/western Alaska, the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas in the Arctic, it's going to take more units and more people.

Today I can't tell you how many more units or how many more people. That's part of the test we're conducting. That's part of the requirements build that we intend to make.

Q And how many people did you have involved or do you have involved this summer expanding out your -- projecting presence for the Coast Guard?

ADM. BROOKS: The expansion was in the vicinity -- of course, we used Polar Sea and the first ever polar icebreaker multi-mission patrol in the spring, in April, in the north Bering Sea, and that was the full polar sea complement. We've conducted the biweekly -- or every other week -- Arctic domain awareness patrols out of Kodiak or from Nome with the C-130s. Those are C-130 crews on a(n) every two weeks basis. We deployed about 37, 38 people to

Barrow at the forward operating location there. And it was just a few smaller numbers in Prudhoe Bay for that test. So we've been working with 50 or less in each place that we've moved forward, with the exception of Polar Sea. And if Hamilton goes forward, that will be a full 378 crew.

Q Yes, sir. Thank you.

ADM. BROOKS: We have the SPAR en route north now conducting the waterways analysis for -- to determine whether we need to put Aids to Navigation back into the North Slope.

She will also be conducting a search-and-rescue exercise. But that's a -- you know, a 225 crew.

Q Yes, sir. Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Do either one of you have any more questions?

Q Sure. Go back to me, I guess. David, again. Hi.

So for Hamilton, you know, imagining that she does deploy the way you described, what are the -- what are the big challenges, besides ice, obviously?

ADM. BROOKS: The big challenges are ice, distance. And I don't think -- navigation will not be an issue. The Hamilton's got the legs to make the trip. The biggest hazard, frankly, is ensuring that we avoid sea ice -- and it looks like we will. And the second issue is helicopter operations will be constrained because in the Arctic we have a concern -- well, this is true in Alaska. We have a concern with the ability to self-rescue.

In most of the United States and in much of the world, if you send a helicopter offshore you're not too concerned, because there are many other helicopters, either Coast Guard, Department of Defense, or local, state -- state and local helicopters that can respond. In that part of the world, there's almost no organic capability. There's no infrastructure. Barrow rescue has a helicopter, but that's limited range from Barrow. So when you start launching helicopters, sending boats over the horizon, you now have to worry about how do you get them back.

So it's a combination of -- we're instituting particular safety rules for the ship for operations in the vicinity of sea ice, and there's also the issue of the helicopters. We're also concerned that we not conflict with the Alaskan native subsistence. And it's important that we not interfere with their normal life up there on the North Slope.

Q So it sounds like aviation is a recurring theme here. What kind of assets would you -- I mean, ideally, what kind of assets would you -- would you have?

ADM. BROOKS: Assets from the current Coast Guard inventory -- the C-130s have worked well, as long as we say above the temperature limitations. The challenge, really, for helicopters has been not that the 65s didn't work there; it's just that their legs were so short. It's probably an environment that's going to require the H-60s for primary helicopter support, but currently our ships can't deploy H- 60s, the ships in the inventory.

And the second problem is we didn't have 60s that we could spare in southern Alaska to test this summer. We needed all them down south. So looking to the future, we're going to have to come up with a way to test H-60s offshore to see how they work in that environment.

Q Okay, great.

Q Admiral, Peter Stinson again. The National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency is hosting an Arctic domain awareness conference this winter in St. Louis.

And I was wondering if you know if any Coast Guard personnel will be participating in it. And what would you like to see come out of a conference like that?

ADM. BROOKS: Peter, I've seen the conference. We're interested. We haven't gotten to the point of actually planning for attendance. The -- I get in trouble sometimes with the purists, who tell me that there's no difference between maritime domain awareness and Arctic domain awareness.

We started using that term, because the Arctic is a land-water situation. It's not just maritime alone. And the other problem with the Arctic is, we don't understand what it means to have a contact at a given place.

For example, if I have a ship of a certain size, with a certain crew and a certain cargo, inbound to New York at Ambrose, we understand what that means because we know the infrastructure; we know the traffic patterns; we know past history with the company. We know all the surrounding information for a vessel contact in much of the world.

The problem in the Arctic is, we don't know any of that background information. And it occurs in an environment with almost no infrastructure.

So a conference on this topic would be important, to highlight the absence of conventional or organic infrastructure, to collect the data to develop maritime domain awareness or arctic domain awareness and also the experience and the perspective, to understand what something means there.

It's easy to look at it from a New Jersey perspective. But it actually is a different part of the world, where things mean different things. And the weather certainly is very different.

So it's becoming aware of the fact that the Arctic is a unique place that requires very expensive tools and a lot more infrastructure than it currently enjoys.

Q Great. Thank you, sir.

Q That's all I've got. Thanks. LT. CRAGG: Okay.

Peter, do you have any questions?

Q Yeah, I had a couple, just a couple more.

Admiral, you had mentioned small boats in Barrow this summer.

ADM. BROOKS: Right.

Q What were you using? Do you know what platform?

ADM. BROOKS: We were using the 25-foot SAFE Boats.

Q Okay. All right.

And you mentioned that in terms of what we currently have, in terms of assets, the 60s would be a better platform than the 65s. Are they really going to have the legs long enough, to do what needs to be done up there? I mean, it's a huge territory. You overlay Alaska on top of the Continental United States and, I think, it goes from top to bottom.

ADM. BROOKS: I agree that the territory is huge.

The H-60 has much better capability, much longer legs than the 65. And it's the best long-range helicopter in the inventory right now.

Much of the flying up there will probably require dual aircraft or cover because of the self-rescue requirement. We have to be able to rescue whoever we send out because no one else can. You know, those kinds of things all go into this equation. So it's a challenging aviation environment and it's going to be, you know, weather and infrastructure dependent.

Q Assuming that the nation decides to actually move in this direction -- and I don't want to say get our act together, but get the nation's act together in terms of the Arctic -- how long do you think it'll be before the Coast Guard can come up to speed in terms of delivering the services necessary to do the missions on the North Slope?

ADM. BROOKS: Well, we're doing the missions now. I was -- one of the points I like to make is that our legacy marine safety function exists and continues in that part of the world. We inspect the vessels that are there, the barges and the tugs and the tank ships. We inspect the facilities in that part of the world.

We review and participate in the all-pollution response plans and the exercises in that part of the world. We reviewed and participated in the plans for the oil exploration that's currently on hold in litigation. We've had that involvement. And we've done four to five search and rescue cases per year in that part of the world when called and responded -- we responded.

But the issue of the full function operations, the requirement to do everything we do in southern Alaska in northern Alaska at least seasonally, will take several years, perhaps as much as five years to ramp up to a capability. We're ahead of the curve right now, because our indications are that the ship traffic is low, currently, in that part of the world, through the Bering Strait and along the North Slope. So we've got some time to do this. And part of the goal here was to try to be ready when the opening Arctic brought larger numbers of ships.

Q Yes, sir. And most of the Coast Guard's emphasis and focus on this has been in the last 18 months, which I think happens to be with your arrival in Juneau. Were we not doing a whole lot of thinking about that prior to your arrival or has the ice really changed that much in the last 12 to 18 months? ADM. BROOKS: You know, I think this is an issue that has been going for some time. In meetings with the Alaskan natives in the North Slope and in

northwestern Alaska, they tell me that they've been telling the world about these changing conditions for some time, maybe as much as a decade, and people haven't listened.

The -- I credit Mr. Mead Treadwell from the U.S. Arctic Research Commission. He's the one that caught me by the ear and beat me over the head and told me that I needed to pay attention. And so it was Mr. Treadwell that got me oriented in this direction.

And I credit Admiral Allen, because Admiral Allen's the one who saw the issue, saw the potential -- you know, the mission coming, and has pushed and supported me to work this issue.

Q Yes, sir. And I guess part of that would be his recent visit to the North Slope.

ADM. BROOKS: That's correct. It was wonderful to have him up here. He gets it. He really does get it. And his comment that I liked during this visit was that he told people in a number of places that he was "agnostic on the science," quote, unquote, of global warming or climate change, meaning that he didn't have a vote in that; he was agnostic on the politics of the issue. All he knew was that there was more water than ever before, and he was responsible for marine safety and security on that water. And that's why we're pushing forward, is to be prepared -- to be positioned and to be prepared to ensure that we don't have a Titanic of the north, like the motor vessel Explorer in Antarctica last November and we don't have an Exxon Valdez up there that's got litigation pending, you know, almost 20 years later.

Q Yes, sir. With the Explorer, they were sort of lucky that there were assets within a reachable distance. If there was something like that now up north, how would we fare?

ADM. BROOKS: I think the -- my opinion is the Explorer was lucky to have someone nearby who could respond and bring all those people off. And they were lucky in the way the vessel sank that allowed them to use the boats they had. One of the things most people don't understand is it's often very hard to enter lifeboats once a ship heels 30 to 50 degrees and part -- half your boats are in the water and the other half are hanging in the air. And they had open boats. These people were in the Antarctic in open boats, which is not a good situation. But it all worked for them because they had another cruise ship nearby.

There's no current requirement for these cruise ships to travel in company in these environments, and a ship alone, like the Bremen, the German ship that came through last summer to Barrow, if they had a problem 200 miles north of Barrow, we would be in a very difficult situation. It would take me almost a week to get surface rescue forces there. We could get a C-130 on top within, you know, four to six hours, probably, but beyond that, drop some rafts. The rest of it could be dismal.

Q Yes, sir. And you've had some situations -- while I think they've all been groundings this summer -- down your way. So I mean, there's certainly the possibility that things could happen up there if people choose to go there.

ADM. BROOKS: It's obviously a possibility. The -- we have between 21 and 23 major cruise ships operating in southeast Alaska, south central Alaska every day through the summer.

It's big business here.

(Fire alarm sounds.) And I can't believe I just had a fire alarm.

Obviously, any ship can fail. Any ship can run aground. The ships -- the large ships, particularly, have been very safe in Alaska. And I don't want to give the wrong impression, but we have had some groundings and other issues.

Q That's all I have.

LT. CRAGG: Sir, we can wrap this up.

ADM. BROOKS: I'm going to have to run because of the fire alarm. Thank you very much for the time today and the opportunity to talk about the Coast Guard in the Arctic.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir.

Q Thank you, Admiral.

LT. CRAGG: Today's program will be available online at the Bloggers link on dod.mil, where you'll be able to access a story based on today's call, along with the source documents, such as the rear admiral's bio, the audio file and the print transcripts. Again, thank you for the bloggers and for Rear Admiral Brooks' time on today's Bloggers Roundtable. This concludes today's events.

Q Lieutenant Cragg, thank you very much. I appreciate it.

LT. CRAGG: Is this Peter?

Q Yeah.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. Thank you so much for -- now, you work with (Jim ?), right?

Q Yes.

LT. CRAGG: Okay.

Q He's another poster. I thought he would be on today, but -- LT. CRAGG: He had signed up for it. So I just didn't know if he was going to be -- so that's fine. But it's good talking to you. Thank you.

Q All right. Well, we appreciate all your work, and I've noticed the last couple of weeks have -- you've had some Coast Guard folks, so it looks like they're getting into the swing of things.

LT. CRAGG: Yep. What I'll do is I'll just give you a call in a couple minutes.

Q Okay.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. Thank you.

Q Yep.

LT. CRAGG: Bye-bye.

END.